DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 363 CS 511 123

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TITLE	Closing the Gap: How the Alabama Reading Initiative Is Transforming Reading Instruction for All Students.
INSTITUTION	Alabama State Dept. of Education, Montgomery.; A-Plus Education Foundation, Montgomery, AL.
SPONS AGENCY	Alabama State Commission on Higher Education, Montgomery.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	21p.; Published with support from the Best Practices Center. Project evaluation funded by Dwight D. Eisenhower professional development program.
AVAILABLE FROM	Alabama Reading Initiative, Alabama Department of Education, P.O. Box 302101, Montgomery, AL 36130-2101. Tel: 334-353-1389; Web site: http://www.alsde.edu.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS	Alabama Reading Initiative

ABSTRACT

This report examines the first 2 years of the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), whose goal is 100% literacy for all Alabama's public school children using a balanced approach to reading instruction. It includes results from the external evaluation team, examples of changes in teaching practices and student behaviors, as well as the voices of participating teachers and school administrators. The report discusses what the ARI is, the key players (the principal, classroom teacher, higher education partner, reading specialist, and inservice center reading specialist), early results (reading scores are up, students are reading more, discipline problems are down, and special education referrals are down), stories of transformation from classrooms across the state, and challenges for the ARI. (RS)

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How The Alabama Reading Initiative Is Transforming Reading Instruction For All Students

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The Alabama Reading Initiative is a project of the State Board of Education and the State Department of Education. The A+ Education Foundation provided the inital funding and helped recruit the private and public sector partners for the first two years. After the Alabama Reading Initiative demonstrated promise in classrooms across the state, Governor Don Siegelman proposed statewide expansion of the initiative, and the Alabama Legislature allocated six million dollars for fiscal year 1999-2000 and $10 million for fiscal year 2000-2001.

This report is dedicated to everyone involved in the Alabama Reading Initiative. Special thanks to the following for taking the lead in solving Alabama's literacy problem:

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Project evaluation funded in part by a federal grant under the Dwight D. Eisenhower professional development program administered by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

Funds from the settlement of antitrust litigation

CLOSING THE GAP: HOW THE ALABAMA READING INITIATIVE IS TRANSFORMING READING INSTRUCTION FOR ALL STUDENTS is a report on the first two years of the ARI. The goal of the ARI is 100% literacy for all Alabama's public school children. This report includes results from the external evaluation team, examples of changes in teaching practices and student behaviors, as well as the voices of participating teachers and school administrators. Because of A+'s belief that literacy is fundamental to raising student achievement in Alabama, the A+ Education Foundation developed and published this report, with the assistance of the Best Practices Center.

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Walker Printing Company, Inc.

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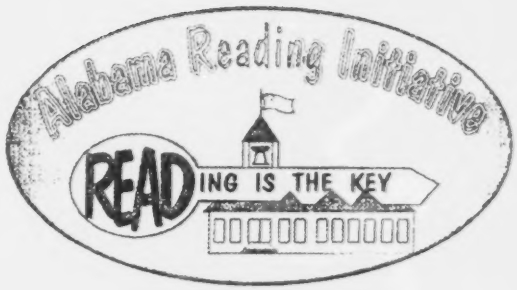

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Closing The Gap:

Over 100

Alabama public school students

That's just a number—and not even a surprising one—until you consider the impact of illiteracy on a young person. Rather than accepting the problem as inevitable, we can begin to change things by giving every young person the instruction they need to learn to read.

If you want to solve a problem you have to name it, define it, and measure its depths. That takes courage—especially in a high stakes environment where hiding or ignoring problems might seem safer than carefully identifying them.

Buckhorn High School is one of the first high schools in the state to own up to a problem it shares with so many other Alabama schools. Attempting to deal with a basic skill like reading in a high school environment is a bold move. As Tommy Ledbetter, principal at Buckhorn noted, **"The prevailing philosophy at the secondary level is 'we assign reading; we don't teach it.'"** By high school, students who can't read well face lots of pressure and many lost years. And their teachers, for the most part, have not known how to help them.

Buckhorn, located in Madison County in a growing metropolitan area just outside of Huntsville, has 850 students from both rural and suburban communities. The student population comes from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some are the children of doctors, educators, farmers, and business owners. Others are the children of skilled technical workers, engineers, truck drivers and day laborers. The test scores at Buckhorn indicate that the school is performing at or above the state average on all of Alabama's accountability standards.

"Still, we knew we had a reading problem," said Ledbetter. "We can't afford to let these kids fall through the cracks. We had shortcomings as a faculty to tackle this, and we needed help." To get help, they applied to become one of the first high schools to participate in the Alabama Reading Initiative. The faculty willingly went into "uncharted waters" said Sara Fanning, instructional leader, in search of tools to help their students read better.

The first step in that process was to identify Buckhorn's struggling readers. Two hundred students, almost one in four, were found to be reading below their grade level. The latest NAEP scores, a measure that compares students across the nation, indicated that 34 percent of 8th graders in Alabama read "below basic" level. These figures suggest that even though Buckhorn has a large number of

Thousand

can't read at their grade level.

struggling readers, its reading levels are probably above average for Alabama. Still faculty members weren't satisfied. "The problem looks different when you see the face of a struggling reader. It's not just a score anymore. At the high school level, for these students, reading is a barrier for every subject," said Ledbetter.

After ARI training, during the first three weeks of school, Sara Fanning and other specially trained teachers spent one-on-one time with Buckhorn students using new assessment tools they learned through the Alabama Reading Initiative. Fanning, a veteran educator of 25 years, said that experience changed her life forever. The assessments revealed the magnitude of the problem. **"For days, I couldn't eat or sleep," she said.**

For many Buckhorn teens, the reading assessment was a difficult experience. They had been hiding severe reading difficulties for years, and they were about to be discovered. As Mrs. Fanning called students out of class one by one to administer the reading assessment, those who couldn't read began to panic. Some of them cried, some of them were wringing their hands, and one of them quickly confessed to her, "I can't read." One student, when asked, could not call out a single word on a fourth-grade vocabulary list.

Both the faculty and students at Buckhorn were steering through uncharted waters. No one had ever plumbed the depths of the reading problem, student by student, with that level of attention or precision before. **The initial assessment revealed that 123 students were reading at elementary grade levels,** with many at the fourth grade level or below. The struggling students crossed the spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds and race. Some of them were registered in chemistry and other advanced classes. **They had one thing in common: they couldn't read their own textbooks.**

With knowledge comes a price. As Fanning warns, "Once you open the can of worms, you can't turn back. Once you see and really know, you have to keep going."

Intervention at the high school level can meet some students' needs, but it can't pick up all the pieces that were missed along the way. Social stigmas and damage to students' self-concept have already taken their toll. Years of educational opportunity were lost while these students were learning to hide their reading difficulties.

Fanning agonizes that identifying students so late in the game means that there isn't enough time or resources to help them all. Some will remain in the shadows—moving from the classroom to the world of work with low literacy skills.

For many other Buckhorn students, however, being "discovered," though painful, offered a chance to learn to read better. They were given support and skillful intervention from the ARI-trained reading specialist. They were welcomed out of the shadows and into full membership in the classroom.

Improving reading at the high school level is very difficult—results are much slower to appear than with intervenion with younger children. **Still, more than half of the students who received intervention showed significant improvement.** Because of ARI training, all teachers at Buckhorn High School are integrating reading strategies into their daily lesson plans to help all students read better. In addition, there is a new reading elective for all struggling ninth-grade readers, so they get a headstart on the special instruction they need.

The Buckhorn story vividly describes why the Alabama Reading Initiative was created, and it gives us an example of what is necessary for all of Alabama's school children to read well. Alabama is right to set a goal of 100% literacy for all students. Reaching that goal will take time, resources and extraordinary commitment. But once that goal is reached, thousands of our high school students will no longer have to hide their illiteracy—or live with the shame that comes from our failure to develop them into strong readers before they ever leave elementary school.

Schools that are a part of the Alabama Reading Initiative are already on their way to that goal.

Closing The Gap:

What is ARI?

Dollar for dollar, research shows that investment in teacher professional development increases student achievement more than anything else.

Good teaching matters most when it comes to improving education. Research shows that high quality, subject-specific professional development for teachers improves teaching and results in improved student achievement. Today every successful business leader knows that staying ahead of the curve requires continuous learning and access to information and new skills. Valuing the difficult job teachers do means giving them the high quality support and development that professionals in other fields can expect and receive.

Alabama has invested very little in professional development in the past. Since 1997, Alabama has spent only two-tenths of one percent of the growth of the Education Foundation Program on professional development. The investment in the Alabama Reading Initiative is a shift in a positive direction —delivering urgently needed information and skills for reading instruction to teachers in the classroom.

The Alabama Reading Initiative is targeted on three fronts:

- ✓ Strengthening reading instruction in the early grades,
- ✓ Continuously expanding all students' reading power and comprehension levels,
- ✓ Intervening effectively with struggling readers.

ARI moves beyond the debate about phonics and "whole language" strategies to promote what research proves to be effective: a balanced approach to reading instruction. Research tells us that a "balanced approach" to reading is not a compromise. It combines the explicit teaching of skills needed to decode words (phonics, phonemic awareness) and language-rich, literature-rich instruction.

Today's teachers are likely to favor one approach or the other, depending on when and where they went to college. But, as ARI's success demonstrates, a single teaching method is not enough.

Under a one-size-fits-all approach, some children simply will not learn to read. Success requires addressing children as individuals and meeting their specific needs for reading instruction. To help each individual student achieve, teachers must have expertise in using multiple strategies and creative classroom management techniques to help each individual student achieve.

Many elementary teachers have not had any training in reading instruction since college, and the body of knowledge about reading continues to grow tremendously. Teachers in upper grades or subject specific areas may have no background in reading instruction at all, even though many of their students may be struggling to understand their textbooks and other academic materials.

ARI's balanced approach to reading instruction requires a highly skilled teacher. It builds teachers' capacity by giving them access to the latest research, many practical demonstration lessons, and ongoing support.

The ARI teacher training covers eight modules based on the latest research on reading instruction:

- ✓ Language development and vocabulary,
- ✓ Phonemic awareness and phonics,
- ✓ Concepts of print,
- ✓ Comprehension strategies,
- ✓ Reading/writing connection,
- ✓ Formal assessment,
- ✓ Informal assessment and
- ✓ Effective intervention.

The Alabama Reading Initiative is a K-12 comprehensive strategy to bring the best research on reading instruction and the best teaching practices to classrooms in Alabama. The primary method is intensive, research-based professional development for teachers.

This is not a "program" or curriculum that schools purchase, nor is it a "flavor of the day" approach that will fade as a new fad emerges. It is a research-driven process for developing and maintaining an expert corps of reading teachers across Alabama – and producing permanent improvements in the academic performance of all our students.

ARI is designed to create systemic change.

Achieving the goal of 100% literacy for all school children is very ambitious. It is a complex challenge involving hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers. ARI is designed for systemic change and lasting impact. It is an example of public education putting proven, forward-thinking principles to work.

ARI is focused on leverage points for change: continuous professional development for teachers and teacher preparation programs. It requires the principal and faculty to commit to the shared goal and to make a local investment.

WHAT MAKES ARI WORK?

- ✓ **Voluntary**
- ✓ **Clear Goals**
- ✓ **Innovation is Rewarded and Shared**
- ✓ **Peer Coaching**
- ✓ **Teams of Expert Practitioners**
- ✓ **Feedback Loops**
- ✓ **Networks of Communication**

Participation is voluntary. Innovation in implementation at the local level is expected, rewarded and shared with other practitioners. School faculties are trained as teams of expert practitioners on a clear and common mission. The "spread" of the program is based on expert peer coaching. Non-hierarchical in nature, it develops a whole army of experts: reading specialists, peer coaches, and trainers. Partnerships with colleges of education and on-going training build networks of communication and deliver information as needed. On-going evaluation and direct feedback loops measure progress and constantly inform the process.

The ARI Process

- ✓ Schools apply to become Literary Demonstration Sites and are selected for readiness and commitment.
- ✓ Schools adopt the goal of 100% literacy.
- ✓ 85% of the faculty, including the principal, participate in a 10-13 day intensive summer training.
- ✓ Schools and local school systems designate and support full-time reading specialists who spend half of their time with struggling readers and half of the time coaching other teachers.
- ✓ Higher education faculty partners work as mentors connected to each school, providing support, access to research, demonstration, and problem-solving assistance.
- ✓ School faculties develop and implement an intervention plan for struggling readers.
- ✓ Teachers put their new skills to work. They utilize new assessment tools to check progress and work together to apply instructional concepts, sharpen their skills and solve problems.
- ✓ Reading Specialists attend monthly advanced training sessions and share new techniques and information with teachers at their schools.
- ✓ External evaluators observe classroom practices and compare and analyze students' test scores.

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The Key Players

If reading is key, then those who teach reading are key.

Skilled educators with access to the latest research and best practices are our best defense against illiteracy. Margaret Yarbrough Elementary in Auburn gives us a view of these key players at work to achieve 100% literacy. At each Literacy Demonstration Site, ARI supports the development, training and collaboration of a team of key players:

Principal
Classroom Teacher
Higher Education Partner
Reading Specialist
Inservice Center Reading Specialist

Principal

The principal's role in ARI is that of instructional leader. The principal attends the ARI training and leads the faculty in the development and implementation of a school-wide intervention plan for struggling readers.

The principal helps develop and coordinate a schedule that allows for individualized reading instruction, supports teachers with on-going professional development, and works with the reading specialist to provide coaching opportunities for the faculty and regular monitoring of struggling readers.

The ability of the principal to be an effective instructional leader is a determining factor in a school's success.

"When a few people go off to a conference, the whole school doesn't change. With ARI, we all went, we all planned, and the whole school moved forward together.

"ARI is not a program—it is a commitment to the goal of 100% literacy and doing what it takes to get there. Because of ARI, we have developed more continuity, consistency and collaboration.

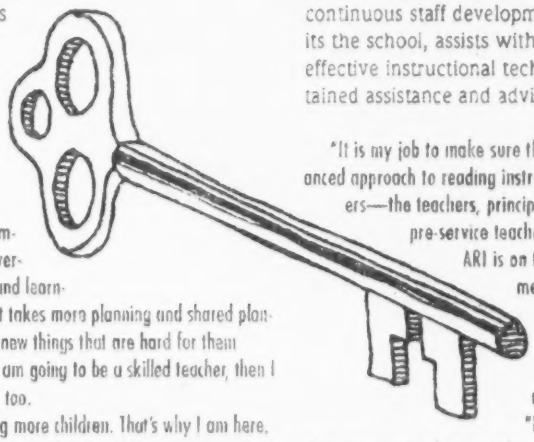
"The principal has to be the instructional leader, very involved in the kind of teaching that is happening. We are all lifelong learners, and we have to have professional development to be sure we are good at what we do and getting better all the time. We use every creative strategy we can come up with to get our teachers the training they need. The key is professional development. The principal's job is to stay on top of that."

Debbie Smith, Principal,
Yarbrough Elementary School

Computers, books, and programs don't teach children to read. Educators do. The Alabama Reading Initiative is building the capacity of educators to provide effective reading instruction.

Classroom Teacher

Because whole faculties participate together in ARI training and in the development of reading intervention plans for their schools, every classroom teacher develops new skills for reading instruction, regardless of grade or subject area. Besides identifying and intervening with struggling readers, teachers learn techniques for helping all students expand their reading power with better comprehension, broader vocabulary and better writing skills.



"When I first went to the summer academy, some of it was overwhelming. Integrating reading and learning new techniques is difficult. It takes more planning and shared planning. But we ask children to do new things that are hard for them everyday. So why can't we? If I am going to be a skilled teacher, then I have to be willing to be a pupil, too.

"It is hard, but I am reaching more children. That's why I am here. I have seen major changes in my lower level readers. I see my students using techniques they learned from the reading specialist. ARI training has made me a more balanced teacher. I am more aware of phonics than before. It has also changed how I will teach other subjects— like math—to reach all of my students.

"Every student in my class reads out loud to me everyday. Our principal has made that a goal for us. Now when I hear a child read, I know where they are and where they are struggling. That's the best way I can make sure no one is falling through the cracks."

Debbie Vick, Third-grade Teacher
Yarbrough Elementary School

Higher Education Partner

The Higher Education Partner is a college of education faculty member who participates in the Summer Academy and commits to helping Literacy Demonstration Sites achieve the goal of 100% literacy. The higher education partner is connected with local schools to provide guidance, access to research, and continuous staff development. This person regularly visits the school, assists with monitoring progress, models effective instructional techniques, and provides sustained assistance and advisement.

"It is my job to make sure that we all understand what a balanced approach to reading instruction is. I make sure all the players—the teachers, principals, reading specialists and even my pre-service teachers—are all on the same page. The ARI is on the right track, because it is development oriented, practice oriented and demonstrated. It has made us more balanced in the way we teach, and it has impacted how we teach reading instruction in the university.

"In the past, instead of finding out what was wrong when a student couldn't read, we did the same things over and over and handed them more worksheets. That never helped. Now every child gets every piece of the process. Teaching reading is not about following the teacher guide. It is about Josh, Marcus or Kelly.

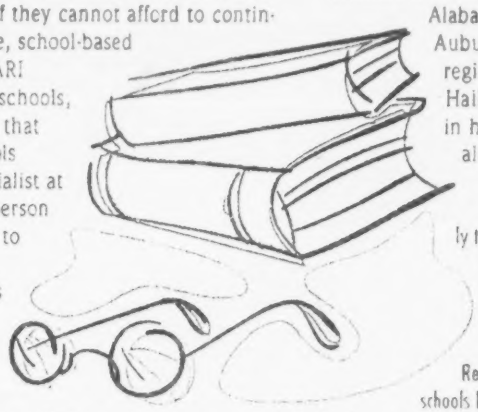
"The benefits of the higher education partnership are incredible. When I teach, one of my feet is in the school and the other one is in the University. Long after the summer academy, I am there with the teachers and the reading specialists."

Dr. Pam Boyd, Auburn University
Higher Education Partner for
Yarbrough Elementary School

Reading Specialist

In Literary Demonstration Sites across the state, the Reading Specialist is frequently cited as the single most important person to improving reading achievement. State ARI funds and LEAs support the creation of this position. The Reading Specialist spends half-time with struggling readers and half-time coaching teachers in best practices. Because this person's time is devoted to reading instruction, the school is able to stay up-to-date on emerging research, available materials and instructional techniques. ARI's theory is that the very best teachers ought to work with struggling readers. Many of Alabama's best teachers have taken on this challenge as Reading Specialists.

When the ARI began, each participating school was provided with funding for its own Reading Specialist for one year. Some are able to continue the position by using Title I funds. Other schools try to creatively fill the gaps if they cannot afford to continue to employ a full-time, school-based Reading Specialist. As ARI expands to serve more schools, limited resources mean that new participating schools "share" a Reading Specialist at the system level. This person still provides assistance to teachers and students, but resource constraints mean their time is divided between more schools.



"We keep the focus on kids' needs. Every school needs their own Reading Specialist. I have taught for 17 years. This experience and the chance to learn and help kids be successful makes me want to keep teaching. I am a more balanced teacher now. I have multiple strategies to meet every child's need, and I work with teachers on a professional level. I have learned more in the past two years as ARI Reading specialist than I ever learned before."

Pam Yandle, Reading Specialist,
Yarbrough Elementary School

Inservice Center Reading Specialist

Eleven Inservice Centers connected to colleges of education across the state provide educators with professional development. As ARI expands to reach more schools, the volume of training needs and support increases exponentially. ARI partnered with the Inservice Centers to create the position of Inservice Center Reading Specialist to support participating schools and focus existing professional development resources on high quality reading instruction. This Inservice Center Reading Specialist spends four days a week in schools, and one day a week developing and coordinating training. Activities include supporting Reading Specialists at the school and system level, training the growing body of trainers, nurturing networking among principals, and helping coordinate the summer academy for schools in their region.

Jennifer Hall is the Reading Specialist at the East Alabama Regional Inservice Center in Auburn. Twenty-eight schools in that region are participating in ARI. Ms. Hall is focusing on four school systems in her region, two of which are on alert status.

"ARI changed me drumatically. The monthly trainings are the best staff development I have ever received. It is graduate level training. This experience has motivated me to go on and work on my doctorate.

"I see lots of changes in schools. Reading specialists are the catalysts in their schools because they have access to continuous development. The principals are the guiding force for instruction. We are connecting everything between the schools and the colleges of education more powerfully than ever before. The undergraduates are getting this training now, and they will leave the university more prepared.

"This is a growth experience. If you view ARI as a two-week institute, then you have missed it. This is a commitment to on-going learning and continuous growth as a teacher. I see the results in students and teachers. Last year, I was the Reading Specialist at Drake Middle School in Auburn, and I worked intensively with struggling readers. By the end of the year, most of them had made it to grade level. Now, I can teach reading from ground zero."

Jennifer Hall, Reading Specialist
East Alabama Regional Inservice Center

Measuring Progress

Imagine an eighth-grade student who is reading at a second-grade level. If that student receives special instruction and moves to the sixth-grade level in reading in one semester, wouldn't you agree that is remarkable improvement?

In April that same student would take the SAT-9, the standardized test given to Alabama students every spring. Because she is in the eighth-grade the test would be on the eighth-grade level. Although the student made great strides, her progress would not show up on the SAT-9. Even though the student jumped four grade levels in reading, she would still be achieving below grade level.

This example makes it clear why results with older students are slower to appear than with younger students. Assessment is critical, but catching up takes time. We must have high expectations and reasonable timetables. Teachers trained through ARI are taught to use informal assessment tools that can gauge students' progress throughout the year. Positive changes in student behaviors, teaching practices, and school climate are early indicators that we will see improvement in student achievement over time.

Early Results

The Center for Educational Accountability of the University of Alabama at Birmingham designed and conducted the evaluation of ARI.

- **The reading scores of students at ARI Literary Demonstration Sites schools show more improvement** from 1998-2000 than at similar schools that did not participate.
- **The percentage of students classified as struggling readers at ARI Literary Demonstration sites decreased** from 1998-2000, while the percentage of struggling readers at non-ARI schools stayed constant.
- **Students are reading more.** Library circulation in the participating schools is up dramatically. Lincoln Elementary in Talladega County saw library circulation triple in one year. Library circulation rose by an average of 43 percent in the original literary demonstration sites with data for 1998-2000.
- **Teachers are teaching differently.** Teachers report and external evaluators confirm that teachers use 76 percent of the new practices they were taught in ARI professional development. After ARI training, 86 percent of teachers felt more prepared to teach reading.
- **Discipline problems are down** significantly at participating schools. School climates are improving. Discipline referrals declined by an average of 67 percent in the original literary demonstration sites reporting data for 1998-2000. Jonesboro Elementary School in Bessemer noted a 75 percent reduction in discipline referrals, and Discovery Middle School in Madison recorded almost 80 percent fewer discipline referrals. In both cases, the principal linked the improvement to ARI because more students are meaningfully engaged in the learning process.
- **Special education referrals are down.** At Arab Elementary School, referrals declined from 23 to three in one year. More students' difficulties with reading are successfully handled in their regular classrooms, as teachers learn new intervention strategies.

Evidence of Lasting Impact

- **Colleges of education are changing the way they prepare new teachers for reading instruction.** The State Board of Education adopted new, research-based standards for preparing future teachers and reading specialists.
- **Partnerships between faculty at colleges of education and participating schools are growing and reinforcing teacher development.**
- **All 11 Regional Inservice Centers collaborate with the ARI to provide substantial ongoing professional development for teachers in their regions.** Center staff have embraced the responsibility of coordinating the ARI summer academies.
- **A growing number of teacher trainers is increasing Alabama's capacity to deliver to students the best reading instruction possible.** There are 700 K-12 and college personnel faculty now certified to offer professional development in reading.
- **A new master's degree in reading education has been certified by the State Board of Education, and colleges are developing programs that will increase the expertise in the field.**

Cedar Ridge Middle School: Improving Writing through Reading

Research shows that there is a strong connection between reading and writing. The faculty at Cedar Ridge Middle School in Decatur decided to capitalize on this connection with their school plan developed through ARI. The faculty added an emphasis in writing with a consistent grading rubric used in all grades and all subjects. Reading Specialist Dee Dee Jones said their students' writing scores on the Alabama writing assessment "zoomed way ahead in just one year."

She cites the emphasis on reading and the continuity of curriculum developed in the ARI process as the reasons for the dramatic improvement. "The training at the summer academy set the stage. We spent so much time as a faculty planning together. We just took the writing piece to the next level."

Cedar Ridge Writing Scores

Students are tested on four types of writing: descriptive, narrative, expository and persuasive. Four achievement levels indicate students' writing competency, with one indicating the lowest end of the measurement scale, and four indicating the highest. Gains were seen in just one year in all four types of writing.

1998-1999 SCORES		1999-2000 SCORES	
Descriptive		Descriptive	
Level 1	12%	Level 1	5%
Level 2	50%	Level 2	41%
Level 3	36%	Level 3	49%
Level 4	0%	Level 4	5%
Narrative		Narrative	
Level 1	7%	Level 1	0%
Level 2	31%	Level 2	20%
Level 3	60%	Level 3	75%
Level 4	2%	Level 4	5%
Expository		Expository	
Level 1	17%	Level 1	2%
Level 2	64%	Level 2	27%
Level 3	19%	Level 3	54%
Level 4	0%	Level 4	17%
Persuasive		Persuasive	
Level 1	20%	Level 1	4%
Level 2	52%	Level 2	25%
Level 3	27%	Level 3	58%
Level 4	0%	Level 4	12%

Classrooms Across the State

West Blocton Elementary: Making Up The Gap

From the outside, West Blocton Elementary School in Bibb County looks like almost any other school. As soon as you step inside the school, usual expectations are replaced with wonder. Classrooms are filled with words. In the kindergarten rooms everything is labeled with neat letters, even the clock and the garbage can. Books hang in pockets on the walls, and stacks of books sit on every table. In the first-grade hall, bulletin boards boasts stories written and edited by seven year-olds. Complete sentences and careful punctuation fill the pages with neat handwriting. The time and concerted effort of first graders and teachers are obvious.

West Blocton is a small timber and mining community in Bibb County. The majority of the students at the Title I school are on free or reduced lunch. West Blocton became a Literary Demonstration Site in 1998, the first year of ARI. "The Alabama Reading Initiative is the best thing that ever happened to us. The professional development opportunities gave us tools we didn't have before. It affirmed what we knew and gave us permission to use every tool to help students who are struggling," said Carol Belcher, principal.

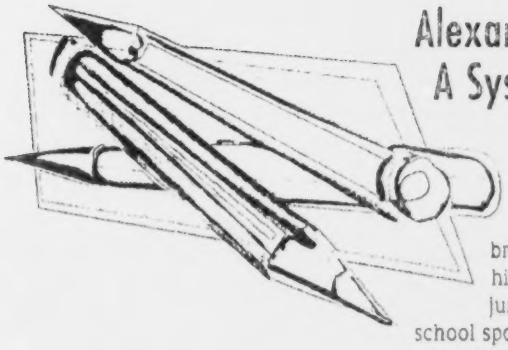
As a result of what they learned at ARI, West Blocton made many changes. Teachers have time to work together, planning and developing strategies for struggling students as a team. They coach each other with ideas and suggestions for improvement. They use creative scheduling to give teachers more individual time with students. Some teachers now stay with the same group of students for two years in a row so they focus their instruction on the needs of students that they know well. They know how to assess students' reading ability better, identify problems with precision, and use targeted intervention strategies.

"The Alabama Reading Initiative has put us on an equal playing field with the schools that have more resources in communities with higher socio-economic levels. It's about training teachers based on proven research. The Alabama Reading Initiative is making up the gap," said Dr. Cheryl Fondren, West Blocton's reading specialist.

This year the State Department of Education recognized the excellence of West Blocton by nominating it for a National Blue Ribbon School award. Belcher recognizes ARI training as a critical catalyst that helped a hardworking faculty attain higher levels of excellence. The children of West Blocton are getting the best there is, and their students' scores show it.

Significant progress has been made at Literary Demonstration Sites, particularly with struggling readers. The Stanford scores at West Blocton Elementary School in Bibb County reflect ARI's impact:

- ✔ **Before ARI, 41 percent of third graders were reading below grade level. After one year, only 10 percent in that group are reading below grade level.**
- ✔ **Before ARI, 33 percent of fourth graders were reading below grade level. After one year only 8 percent were still behind.**
- ✔ **Overall, 62.5 percent of the struggling readers improved to grade level reading or above in one year.**
- ✔ **These gains were maintained during their second year of participation.**



Alexander City Schools: A System-Wide Approach

Jim Nabors, superintendent of education in Alexander City, is not a typical educational administrator. A retired executive from the Russell Corporation, Nabors became superintendent last year, bringing his experience from the corporate world with him. He and the entire Alexander City school system jumped into the ARI with both feet, and now high school sports coaches are gladly taking the lead on developing motivation strategies for student reading.

"It was clear from our scores that we have a reading problem. It's not rocket science. We have to do something differently," Nabors said.

"We knew that ARI was the help our teachers needed." At the time, none of the schools in Alexander City were involved. Immediately, Nabors began advocating for the Alexander City school system to get involved in the ARI all at once. Generally, schools apply and are chosen individually, but Nabors knew that all of the teachers needed access to better training in order to change the whole system.

Nabors approached the State Department of Education and asked if the whole school system could become a part of ARI in a single year. He raised the $150,000 costs for teacher training stipends himself, and met with all the faculty members in the system to get them behind the idea. How could the State Department say no? All Alexander City Schools are Literary Demonstration Sites in 2000-2001, making it the first system-wide participation in the state.

Nabors says that his business experience makes him eager to invest in targeted and high quality professional development. "Why evaluate teachers and make recommendations for change if you don't follow up with professional development that helps them improve? To think you can send a kid to college for 3 or 4 years and expect them to be fully prepared to teach is ridiculous. I come from the corporate world, and we just don't do that. We invest in ongoing training and mentoring," he said.

All teachers in the system were trained together during the last weeks of school and early days of summer. Now even math teachers and PE teachers are integrating reading instruction into everything they do. Tillie Parks, Director of Instructional Services, said. "The teachers were so excited and full of ideas that they were ready to start school in June."

"We know we are going to change the culture of our schools to make them reading places," said Parks. "This is the largest and most effective professional development we have ever had. Do we believe a big leap in reading achievement is possible? You bet we do. We have all come together. We have new tools, new skills. We are motivated, and we are all in sync," Parks said.

"Why evaluate teachers and make recommendations for change if you don't follow up with professional development that helps them improve?"

Jonesboro ElementarySchool: Addressing Every Student

"The Reading Initiative is an approach, not a program that you buy. It is different from all the other things we have tried to help our students read better," said Michael Foster, principal of Jonesboro Elementary School in Bessemer. "There is nothing else out there that addresses every student's need. ARI addresses the whole staff, the proficient readers, the struggling readers, and the whole school environment."

Jonesboro Elementary has over 700 students, and 89 percent of them are on free or reduced lunch. Foster noted that 10-20 percent of their students were continuously falling through the cracks when it came to reading. "For years we have tried different things—special programs, re-grouping our students—but nothing addressed all of the children," said Foster.

Foster visited several of the first Literary Demonstration Sites, and he was convinced by what he saw. "These people were beaming about reading and begging people to see what they could do with the research. They understood the research and what to do with it. We watched them in action and saw struggling readers come to life rather than get depressed and misbehave. I saw children come to life before my eyes," said Foster.

The faculty at Jonesboro began to study a borrowed ARI manual the year before they were accepted as a Literary Demonstration Site. They officially became a part of ARI in 1999. This is their second year as an LDS, and their excitement hasn't waned.

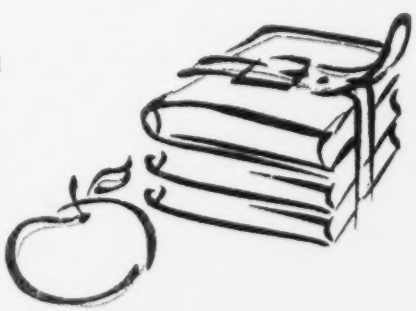
"We have seen a much improved attitude about reading among both children and teachers," said Barbara Roberts, reading specialist at Jonesboro. Students clamor to present the latest book they have read over the intercom for "book of the day." PE and lunch have been restructured to give more uninterrupted attention to reading and to provide time for teachers to work together.

Foster says that discipline problems are down 75 percent. Attendance is up. "We aren't spending our time running off copies of worksheets that bore children. We are engaging them. The culture has changed. It's hip to read—even for the older boys that can be hard to reach," Foster said.

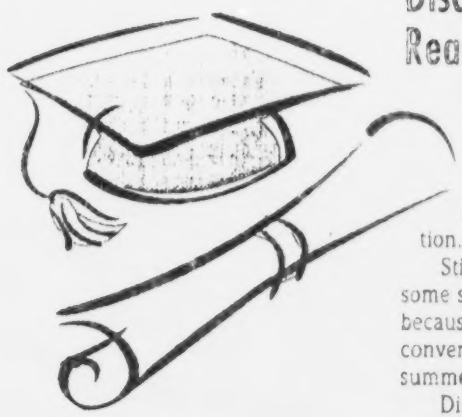
What is different at Jonesboro because of ARI? "We have what we need here—the teachers with the training they need." Foster said. "We don't have to go out and buy expertise or expensive programs. We have it. When a kid hits a brick wall, our teachers know how to supply a strategy that will work—and they know the research that backs them up."

It will take a while for test scores to began to show consistent change notes Foster. "You can't catch every kid falling through the cracks overnight. We think we will look back in five years and see the change reflected consistently in our students' scores. We are going to stay with it. It will take continuous professional development, and we have to keep up the energy. But the research points the way, and that is what will keep us on course," Foster said.

"We...saw struggling readers come to life rather than get depressed and misbehave. I saw children come to life before my eyes."



Discovery Middle School: Taking Reading Instruction to New Levels



According to conventional wisdom, reading is an elementary school subject. By the time a student reaches middle school, direct reading instruction is over.

Secondary teachers are trained in subject-specific areas, and few have ever had classes in reading instruction.

Still many of these math and social studies teachers find that some students are blocked from achievement in every subject because they can't read well. Discovery Middle School bucked conventional wisdom, and *all* of their teachers went to the ARI summer academy to become "reading" teachers.

Discovery Middle School, in the Madison City System, has an ethnically diverse population with a relatively high-income level. They have strong test scores across the board. Still, there are struggling readers at Discovery. "We have some students who were just falling through the cracks," principal Melvina Phillips said, "and we want to expand reading power for all students. Reading is going to be a primary learning tool. Every student needs to do it well and enjoy it."

"It is a key indicator to me that there is good teaching going on in the classroom when students don't have the chance to get in trouble."

After the summer academy, science and math teachers joined English and social studies teachers to integrate comprehension strategies in their subject area. There is a new reading and writing focus in all content areas.

The new teaching strategies at Discovery are producing student achievement. Writing scores have improved significantly. Comprehension in all subject areas has improved. Skilled, direct intervention is paying off with big leaps in progress. The average 8th grade struggling reader went from the 20th percentile to the 60-70th percentile on standardized reading assessments. Many readers at the fourth-grade level moved to the seventh and eighth-grade levels in a six-month period.

Discipline referrals dropped from 681 before ARI participation to 127 during the first year. The second year they inched down further to 118. Phillips relates the drop to participation in ARI. "It is a key indicator to me that there is good teaching going on in the classroom when students don't have the chance to get in trouble."

Phillips is pleased with the tremendous progress. However, she notes that each new class of sixth graders arrives at about the same starting point. In 1999, three of the four feeder elementary schools became Literary Demonstrations Sites. Because of the ARI, Phillips is hopeful and confident that the future classes of sixth graders will be higher achieving readers when they arrive because of better instruction in earlier grades.

Lincoln Elementary School: Changes in Students and Teachers

Lincoln Elementary School is located just three miles from the Talladega Speedway. The population of the K-4 school has increased twenty percent in the past two years. Two-thirds of the students are on reduced or free lunch, qualifying Lincoln as a Title I school. They became a Literary Demonstration Site in 1999.

When children start kindergarten at Lincoln, most of them lack the basic concepts of print—like the understanding that print goes from left to right and that there is a distinction between letters and numbers. "Normally only two children in each kindergarten class are reading by the end of the year," according to principal Dorothy Wright.

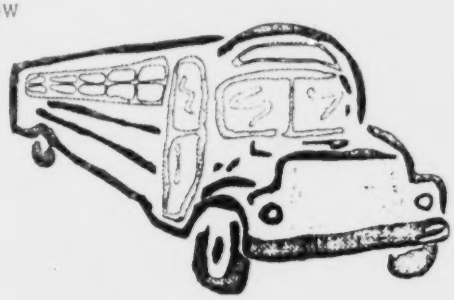
This year, over half of every kindergarten class was reading by spring. Library circulation, normally averaging 13,200 books per year, skyrocketed to 40,000 in one year. In 1998, Lincoln Elementary barely avoided being classified "on caution" by the state since only 55 percent of their students scored in above the minimum state performance standard. This year, 2/3 of their students scored exceeded that standard.

Wright credits ARI training, on-going support and internal staff development. "This was the best staff development we ever had. It was the first time that our whole faculty was ever trained in anything all at the same time," Wright said. "We brought in help throughout the year to keep up the professional development and help teachers solve problems."

Faculty meetings became, for the first time, instructional sharing and problem-solving meetings. Teachers began to actively use each other as expert resources. School scheduling was revamped to accommodate more one-on-one instructional time with struggling readers and more emphasis on reading and writing. By December when students were given the Qualitative Reading Inventory, it was clear that reading was improving, and Lincoln teachers were invigorated by the results. By spring retesting, the scores were even higher.

"We made shifts to deal with every student at their own level. No matter where they start, we are going to show improvement with each child," Wright said. "Before ARI training, third and fourth grade teachers knew little about the basics of reading instruction. If a student made it to those grades without learning to read well, they just fell through the cracks. Now every teacher knows how to help every child make progress."

"This was the best staff development we ever had. It was the first time that our whole faculty was ever trained in anything all at the same time."



Challenges for ARI

The role of the principal and the reality of transition :

The instructional leadership skills and the level of involvement of the principal is a critical factor in the success of Literary Demonstration Sites. At the same time, faculty and principal turnover is a frequent phenomenon. Leadership transitions have already occurred in 10 of the original 16 sites. Many shifts occurred as successful principals moved up, and two of them retired. Training new staff and assuring continuity in instructional leadership is a major challenge for ARI. As ARI expands to schools with varying capacities, principals' access to professional development for instructional leadership is important for all schools to take advantage of the ARI's potential.

The need for reading specialists:

ARI has significantly increased the number of highly trained reading specialists in Alabama. Reading Specialists are providing intense, precise intervention for struggling readers, and ongoing professional development for teachers. However, as ARI expands, reading specialists must be "shared" among several schools due to resource constraints. There is clear evidence that Reading Specialists have a major impact on student achievement, but reading specialists need contact with struggling readers at least twice a week to affect achievement. Maintaining impact is a challenge, however, as their time is divided between more and more students and faculties.

Long-term commitment to meet the challenge:

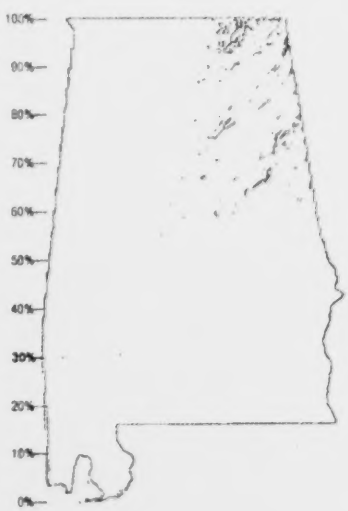
Because Alabama has such a significant reading problem, we must be realistic about what it will take to achieve 100% literacy. ARI is already demonstrating the capacity to impact student achievement through systemic professional development. The challenge is to stay the course with the commitment to reach every student. That will require long-term investment of resources and focus on reading.

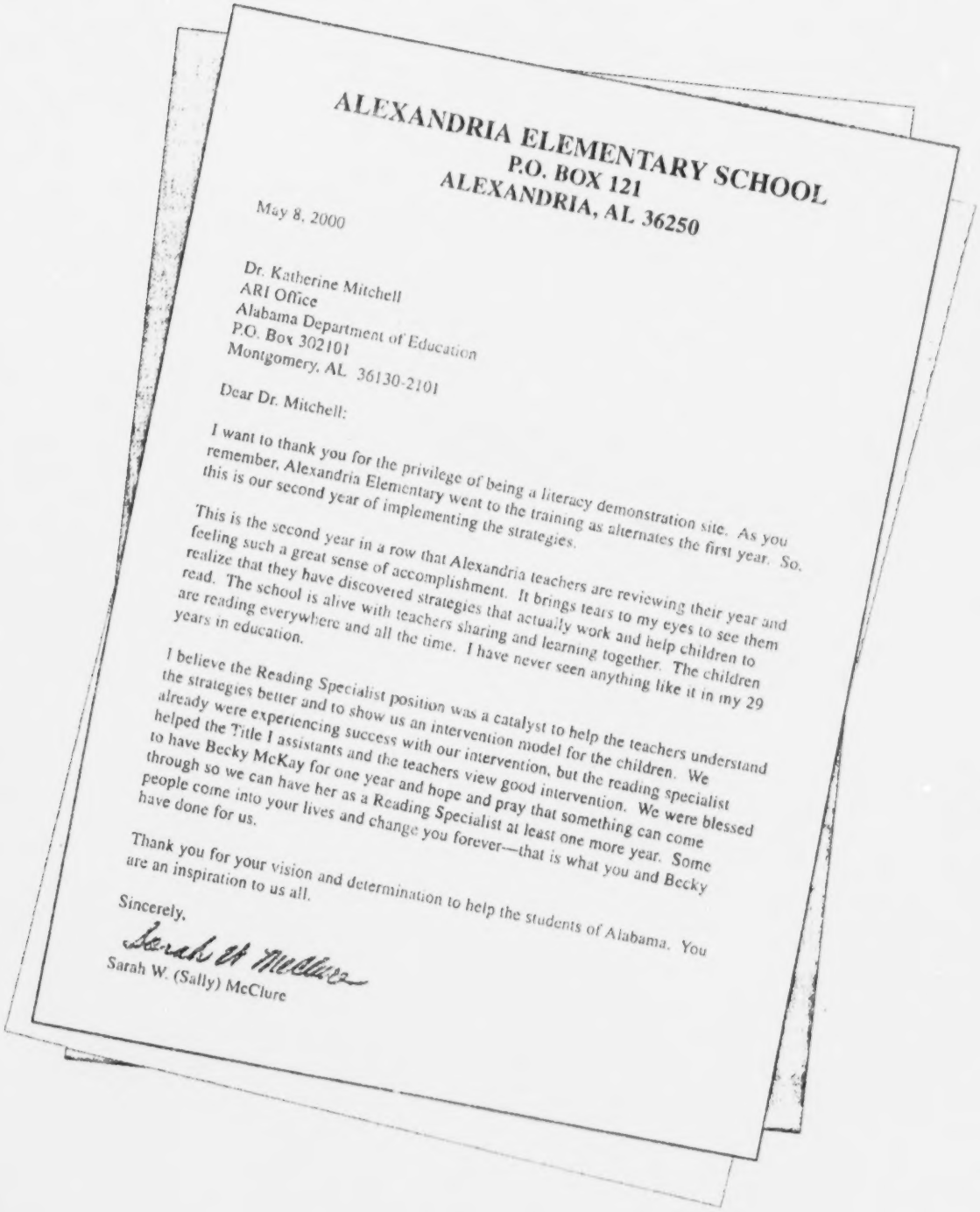
All of the good work of the Alabama Reading Initiative has not yet reached every child. And every child needs the best reading instruction we can provide. We are grateful to the private supporters who made ARI possible, and the elected leaders who supported the expansion to reach more students. We must hold fast to our commitment to 100% literacy for all of Alabama's school children.

ARI is Expanding to Reach Students Across the State

YEAR	1998	1999	2000	2001[2]
Literary Demonstration Sites (Schools)	16	81	268	428
Trained Teachers and Administrators	600	2500	10,000	---
Certified ARI Trainers/Presenters	40	200	700	---
Reading Specialists	0	75	207[1]	---

[1]103 state-funded, 104 locally funded
[2]These schools will be trained in Summer 2001.





ALEXANDRIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
P.O. BOX 121
ALEXANDRIA, AL 36250

May 8, 2000

Dr. Katherine Mitchell
ARI Office
Alabama Department of Education
P.O. Box 302101
Montgomery, AL 36130-2101

Dear Dr. Mitchell:

I want to thank you for the privilege of being a literacy demonstration site. As you remember, Alexandria Elementary went to the training as alternates the first year. So, this is our second year of implementing the strategies.

This is the second year in a row that Alexandria teachers are reviewing their year and feeling such a great sense of accomplishment. It brings tears to my eyes to see them realize that they have discovered strategies that actually work and help children to read. The school is alive with teachers sharing and learning together. The children are reading everywhere and all the time. I have never seen anything like it in my 29 years in education.

I believe the Reading Specialist position was a catalyst to help the teachers understand the strategies better and to show us an intervention model for the children. We already were experiencing success with our intervention, but the reading specialist helped the Title I assistants and the teachers view good intervention. We were blessed to have Becky McKay for one year and hope and pray that something can come through so we can have her as a Reading Specialist at least one more year. Some people come into your lives and change you forever—that is what you and Becky have done for us.

Thank you for your vision and determination to help the students of Alabama. You are an inspiration to us all.

Sincerely,

Sarah W. McClure

Sarah W. (Sally) McClure

Reading Success for Every Student...

In one semester, Tiffany, a sixth grade struggling reader, increased her reading level from grade four to seven. She now loves to read, and she has gained confidence and self esteem. She is asking for new books to read everyday. After only one semester of ARI, library circulation is up two thirds and discipline referrals are down over 20 percent.

Cedar Ridge Middle School
Decatur, Alabama

Participating school faculties spend 10 days together during the summer in intensive training. Most faculties had never had this kind of learning and team-building experience with their colleagues. "This is the first time our whole faculty has ever been on the same page. It has changed the whole environment and attitude in our school—for students and teachers," said Principal James Bush.

Tallassee Elementary School
Tallassee, Alabama

Anthony started fourth grade as a defiant and disruptive student. He could only read at a second grade level. With help from an ARI reading specialist, he was reading on grade level by mid-year. He has gained confidence and become a leader and model student in the classroom. Anthony read publicly at the Governors' State of the State address this year.

Yarbrough Elementary School
Auburn, Alabama

Marcus began his second year in second grade as a non-reader. He had behavior problems in the classroom, and he never smiled. He didn't seem to understand the purpose of reading. He began to work with the reading specialist provided and trained through ARI. By the second semester, he was reading on grade level. Marcus is the first person in his family to learn to read.

Evergreen City School
Conecuh County, Alabama